

I'd like to start with a Tale of Two Pictures. Picture One: it was the best of times.... So even if you were born under a rock or after 1981, I think a lot of the people here recognize this. It's Princess Diana and Prince Charles' wedding. It was the wedding of the decade. People were obsessed, right? It was a fairytale, a real life prince and princess, she was so glamorous, he was so... royal? My mom actually videotaped it onto VHS, and she probably still has it somewhere.

But... and we all know the but... picture number two: It was also the worst of times: underneath it all, there were some major issues. This marriage was one that ultimately ended poorly, lots of gossip, lots of paparazzi, lots of cheating, lots of bad stuff all around. This marriage started like a fairytale; ended like a tabloid.

It kind of encapsulates the wedding hype these days. Marriages are idealized, everything is so sweet and perfect and we kind of wish we were them... and then things fall apart. It's kind of a joke: Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries, shows like the Bachelor and the Bachelorette, Jennifer Anniston and Brad Pitt.... *Angelina Jolie* and Brad Pitt. Say Yes to the Dress, Bridezillas, stuff like that. It's SO easy to get cynical about marriage.

But here's the weird thing: even though today we get pretty cynical about marriage, and we know that marriage has always been kind of a tough issue, God chose marriage as a metaphor for his relationship with people. Despite how messy it is. And he doesn't just use just the fairy tale part: he uses the good, the bad, the ugly, all of it.

Right now we're in the second week of our series we're calling: Metaphor. And I love this series because metaphors are such a beautiful way of describing something. Metaphors tap into our emotions, our experiences, our impressions. They're all about connecting something that's unfamiliar, something that may be hard to grasp or describe, and bring it to a place that's accessible, new, a different perspective, something that shines in a different light. We connect to metaphors. We can picture metaphors.

In our first week, Jake told us about how God uses adoption as a metaphor for how he brings us into the fold, how he sees us and loves us, and takes us, despite our baggage, despite our status, despite the fact that we aren't his biological children: he sees us as his children, his heirs. Jesus gives us the status of brother and sister, sons and daughters of God.

And God uses marriage as a metaphor for his relationship with us, too.

Transition: Our idea of wedding ceremonies and marriage don't really get at the whole picture of what God's trying to tell us in his word about what he sees marriage as, and how he uses

marriage to paint a picture of his relationship to us. To get at it better, we need to look at Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments.

So when we look at the Old Testament and we look at how God talks about marriage as a metaphor there, we also see this other word: covenant. Marriage is a covenant. Now, this isn't a word we use every day, so let's explain it a little better: a covenant is an agreement between two parties who each hold up one side of the bargain. It's not a contract. It's *deeper* than a contract; it's a deeper relationship

So even though we don't really know much about them or hear about them a lot now, covenants happened all the time in the ancient world. They were common outside of the Israelites, the Jewish people who were God's people. Ancient rulers would declare his side of the covenant, and other party would agree. Sometimes they'd use a handshake to seal the deal.

But there are other methods of sealing the deal, something we don't really do anymore: in the ancient world, animal sacrifice as symbol. This might sound kind of nasty or weird, but hold on a minute, because it's actually a pretty powerful symbol. First of all: it was a sacrifice.

Nobody was saying killing this animal was no big deal. It was a big deal- it was a true sacrifice for the person sacrificing it. But it also meant something else. The animal would be chopped up into pieces, and someone would walk between the pieces, basically to say: "So may this happen to me if I fail to make my end of the covenant." "If I break this covenant, I deserve to be quartered."

Serious stuff.

Transition: So, just like a covenant made between two people in the ancient world, marriage is ALSO a covenant made between two people – Marriage is not JUST a contract that you're promising to fulfill. It's a relationship, a symbiotic tie between the two of you, and also before God. Both sides need to agree and hold up their side of it. It's a sacred act.

And the biggest example of covenant in the OT is between God and the Israelites on Mount Sinai. Just to refresh your memory: this happened after God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (all those plagues, let my people go, etc.)

So they're out of Egypt, they're starting out fresh as a free people. And while they're camping out on Mount Sinai, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and other laws. And because this is a covenant, the Israelites must agree to this.

God's side of the covenant, his promise to them is: He will be their God, and He will be with them. He brought them out of Egypt. And He is a God full of lovingkindness and mercy.

Israel's side of the covenant, their promise is: They're going to be faithful to God.

Sounds kind of like a marriage, right? That's purposeful, that's not just you: like someone getting married, the Israelites needed to be faithful to their relationship with God. No "cheating" on him with other gods. Then once it was all laid out, both sides agreed to covenant:

3 Then Moses went down to the people and repeated all the instructions and regulations the Lord had given him. All the people answered with one voice, "We will do everything the Lord has commanded." 4 Then Moses carefully wrote down all the Lord's instructions. Early the next morning Moses got up and built an altar at the foot of the mountain. He also set up twelve pillars, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 Then he sent some of the young Israelite men to present burnt offerings and to sacrifice bulls as peace offerings to the Lord. 6 Moses drained half the blood from these animals into basins. The other half he splattered against the altar. 7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people. Again they all responded, "We will do everything the Lord has commanded. We will obey.": Ex 24:3-7.

Transition: You all might be listening to this and thinking: that is the weirdest and grossest wedding I've ever heard of. But I'm not saying that this covenant IS a wedding. What I am saying is that it is LIKE a wedding, LIKE a marriage. That's what a metaphor is. It's a comparison to help us understand better. And this was God's idea – God thinks that his relationship to his people is like a marriage. This is something that God establishes in His Word. God uses this metaphor when he describes his covenant with the people of Israel.

But after that nice "marriage ceremony" on Sinai, things get hairy: Israel is "unfaithful." What does that mean? Well, they promised to only worship God, and they broke that promise. They worshipped other gods.

You may be thinking: Uh, that's not that hard to avoid. But here's what it was like back then: All other nations/civilizations were polytheistic. That was the norm. So God was asking his people, Israel, to be different from everyone else. But Israel said, no. They'd end up worshipping other gods, rather than be "set apart."

This was a big problem: like wedding vows, Israel said it would "forsake all others (gods)" but was worshipping other gods, behaving like the other civilizations. And these gods were terrible gods. There were a lot of horrific things that were a part of worship, like cultic sex practices/prostitution. Things like child sacrifice. Over and over, God takes action against evil: he will not permit evil to happen without consequence.

The Israelites worshipping other gods was an affront and insult to God.

To continue the marriage covenant metaphor: It would be like having a cheating spouse, but this cheating spouse ALSO joins new partner(s) in doing really terrible things like domestic abuse, child neglect/abuse, things we as a society abhor.

And this became a cyclical pattern in Old Testament: Israel would leave God and worship other gods, be unfaithful, suffer consequence of God's absence and/or punishment, then repent, return to God, and then be accepted back into the fold... only to be unfaithful again. This happens over and over and over and over and over again, in different ways, through different eras, with different leaders and kings, in different countries.

This might be sounding kind of depressing, or hopeless. Like, why does this keep happening? Will anything good happen sometime to stop this? Will people ever change? Well, not on their own. But there's a prophesy of a NEW Covenant, which we find in the book of Jeremiah 31:31-33

31 "The day is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. 32 This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the Lord.

33 "But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Ahhhh. Hmmm. This is different. This is NEW. A new, and different kind of covenant. This sounds hopeful! This sounds good! And remember, this was coming from a prophet talking to the Israelites at a time where things were looking pretty terrible –Israel was going to be conquered, lose their home country, and yet this is the message, the ultimate promise: a new covenant.

A covenant not written on stone, but on hearts. This is a prophecy for something new. A new covenant.

Transition: So if we're going to look at the metaphor for marriage in the OT it's this: a faltering, broken marriage, one with a husband who is faithful and a wife who is not. A husband who is angry over wife's infidelity and shuts the front door after her. A wife who comes back, says she's sorry, and a husband who shows forgiveness and invites her back in. And then, the wife cheats again. It wasn't working. There needed to be a game changer.

And we see this game changer in the New Testament. Marriage shows up as metaphor, but there's a new-looking groom, he looks a bit different than the God in the Old Testament: He's flesh and blood. He's in his early thirties and he's a carpenter.

Jesus is the new bridegroom. When we look at Ephesians 5 starting in verse 21 we see it: "And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. 24 As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything. 25 For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her 26 to make her holy and clean,

washed by the cleansing of God's word. 27 He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. 28 In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. 29 No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. 30 And we are members of his body. – In the same way a husband gives up his life for the bride, so Jesus gave up his life for the church.”

While I would love to talk about marriage and gender roles in the church and in the home, that's not the conversation this time. I'm still talking metaphor. Maybe over coffee sometime. Today, we're talking how Jesus is the groom, and God's people are the bride. So if we look at that here, the way Paul, the guy who wrote this book puts it, Jesus wants to see the church be a pure and faithful spouse, and the way he made that happen was through sacrifice – through the sacrifice of himself for the sake of his people. He laid down his life because he loved his wife: the church.

This is the New Covenant. This is the new marriage ceremony. There aren't any rings exchanged. There aren't any handshakes. But there IS a sacrificial lamb, just like the sacrifices on Mt. Sinai. Jesus laid down his life for his people. God wasn't the one who broke the covenant; we were. We said: “Let us be cut in half if we break this promise!” And we broke it. We were the unfaithful spouse.

But what happened instead: the faithful husband, God, became a person, Jesus, who kept up his end of the bargain said: “I will be broken for your sake. You were unfaithful, but I will lay down my life for your sake.”

Transition: *We* broke the covenant. We're the ones who messed up. We were given a promise and we made a promise with God, and we didn't keep up our end of the deal. We were unfaithful, over and over again. But Jesus was faithful, all the way, despite our unfaithfulness.

And I'm going to be totally up front with you, transparent:

Mostly I'd like to think of myself as a “good person” a faithful and loyal person. You know, I'm not the best person, but there's plenty of people worse than me, right? I'm doing ok! But that's just not true. I broke my covenant vows. I STILL break my covenant vows to God:

When I judge: this is something that I'm pretty terrible at! This is just a daily thing I do, and it usually involves people I don't know at all. They just exist. There's this celebrity Christian mommy blogger who recently left her husband to be with an athlete, and it got a lot of press, and she phrased it like: “This is just me evolving and moving onto a new and deeper love.” Something kind of like that. And me, my eyebrows are just kind of, like almost coming off my

head, like: “WHAAAA...???” But when I do that, what am I doing? Breaking my covenant: “Judge not, or you will be judged.” That’s me, breaking my covenant promise.

Or when I’m impatient and snippy with my husband, or complain about him. It comes out the worst when it’s about packing/dealing with getting out the door. We went on a couple family vacations in July, and I found myself saying stuff to Jeff like: “Why haven’t you finished packing this thing? I TOLD YOU TO DO IT!” “What??? You WANTTO play drums right now, while I’VE BEEN SPENDING ALL MORNING PACKING???”

WHEN DO I GET TO DO SOMETHING FUN??? I NEVER GET TO DO FUN THINGS!” Yes. I actually said that. I made covenant promise, to love and submit and put Jeff first, to serve him. That’s a broken covenant promise.

Here’s another one: When I am jealous of other people around me and wish I had what they had. Some of you might have this problem. We may not think this is all that serious, because especially in the United States, this is what we do! But it’s breaking one of the 10 Commandments: Thou Shall not Covet. So when I start to think: “So and so has a better house than me! Why? Why can’t I have all the nice things?” “Someday, I’ll be happy, because someday we’ll have a super-comfy house, and super-nice things. I want this thing, this thing, this thing.” This usually happens after I’ve been binge-watching HGTV. There’s a reason why people sometimes call it “house porn.” But that’s what the 10 commandments calls “covetousness.” That’s me breaking a covenant promise.

And I’m going to get a little more serious: something we have a hard time with is the idea of collective, institutionalized sin. This is what Israel got wrong A LOT. They were sinning as a people, as a collective. But even though we usually think of sin individually, collective, institutionalized sin is alive and well and destructive today.

Yesterday, we saw that: domestic terrorism in our own country when a 20 year old plowed his car into a crowd of counter protestors at a white-supremacist rally, and it wasn’t a stand-alone incident. The Pulse Nightclub shooting last year. And countless others. We have a sinful history of hatred and fear towards those who we perceive as different, those we are afraid of and think pose a threat based on things like skin color, sexual orientation or gender identity. We have a history of violence, inequality, and oppression of people. And that’s a broken covenant promise. We are unfaithful the unfaithful spouse because we have failed to love our neighbors.

And that’s just three examples! Trust me. There’s more.

Transition: We may not be worshipping pieces of stone or wood that look like gods and goddesses, or doing stuff like sacrificing our children or prostituting ourselves in worship to one of these gods, we are still unfaithful to God. We still break our covenant vow to God.

We are unfaithful to our Creator, our first love, the one who cared for us before we even knew anything at all – before we were born.

But even though we broke our promises over and over again, Jesus was the faithful bridegroom who forgave us. Even though I break my promise over and over again, Jesus is the faithful bridegroom who forgives me.

Even though I break my covenant promise, and I think bad things about other people, and don't wish for their good or pray for my enemies, or am impatient and unloving and judgmental towards other people, Jesus laid down his life for my unfaithfulness to my vows.

Even though I break my covenant promise and am selfish in my marriage, and complain, and I don't always honor my husband, Jesus laid down his life for my unfaithfulness to my vows.

Even though I break my covenant promise and I covet and wish for material things that other people have, even though I don't show thankfulness for the ways God has provided for me, Jesus laid down his life for my unfaithfulness to my vows. And he probably also watches Fixer Upper, so he understands how hard it is, because like everyone else, he loves Chip and Joanna Gaines, too.

Even though we broke our covenant promise and we didn't love others, we didn't strive for justice and acceptance of others. Even though we allowed hatred and social injustice, Jesus was the faithful spouse who laid down his life to abolish hatred and injustice forever

We were unfaithful. We broke our covenant vows. But Jesus is faithful, and he gave us a new vow. Jesus is the faithful bridegroom who breaks the unfaithful covenant cycle between us and God. He fulfills our promise for us.

That is what grace is about – we didn't change, we were still sinners, we were still wayward spouses, but Jesus took our place to heal that broken covenant.

And now, we're in a new marriage, a fresh start, one where, with Jesus' help, through the Holy Spirit, we can be transformed, from unfaithful, cheating spouse, to pure, faithful bride.

Transition: But how does this happen? How does Jesus work in us and change us from unfaithful spouse to faithful? Jesus' transforming work begins as soon as you invite him into your life, I promise you that. That is the new covenant. It's not up to us and our broken promises. It's based on his promise, Jesus' promise. And He promises that, that when you allow him in, he will make you a new creation. But at the same time, there's a certain amount of mystery.

There's a mystery to how Jesus takes an unfaithful bride and transforms her into a beautiful, faithful wife. It's not easy to really pin down a step by step process. It's a mystery. And the Mystery of Bridal transformation has a special term to it, a special churchy word called SANCTIFICATION.

Jesus sanctifies us by being our bridegroom. He makes us into the faithful bride. And he does this over our lives when we spend time in prayer. When we confess our weaknesses, our sins, our need for him. When we love Him and love others. When we read the word of God, get into Scripture and develop a love for it.

It's a mystery, but it's not completely impossible to understand. In the same way in a marriage, when you look back and see how much you've changed, how much your love has grown and how it's changed who you are, that's how Jesus transforms us.

I've been with Jeff since I was seventeen, so it's been almost twenty years. So here's what I was like when we got married. I'm older, yes, time has passed, but there's things just about me that changed: He rubbed off on me. I'm a little more reserved. I don't always have to say what I'm thinking or feeling. I am a little more flexible and patient (sometimes). I can't pinpoint exactly what date I "changed." It took time. But I know I did because of that relationship. That's how it is in our relationship with Jesus.

But, like literal marriage covenants, the sanctification that happens in us doesn't "just happen." It's not passive. It takes investment in that relationship.

That may sound boring, but trust me. It isn't. Investment leads to joy.

When we invest in our relationships, we enjoy and experience more joy in them. You know, if we thought of our marriage covenants like something you just do once and it's done, it would mean it's an unhealthy marriage. If I tossed off my wedding dress and then went back to in my parent's house, threw on some ratty old PJs and just sat back on the couch and bingewatching TV and eating donuts for the rest of my life, and I told Jeff that we made our promise and now we're done, marriage is all set, it's finished... we wouldn't have made it to twelve hours, let alone twelve years. In the same way I have joy in my marriage by being invested in it, I experience joy in my relationship with God by investing in that too.

Transition: One way we can invest in our covenant and be transformed from unfaithful to faithful bride to our faithful God is by being in church community, and through church practices. These aren't empty things – these acts are special and mean something. They're like parts of a ceremony. You are investing in your relationship with Jesus.

This week, when you come up to the communion tables, you'll see that we have little wedding rings there. Communion is an act where we can be connected with God, deeply. We do communion every week, and weekly return back to our new covenant promise.

The church, God's people, is the bride of Christ. It's not singular. It's plural. All of us were unfaithful, but together we are bound in this new covenant. In the Bible, the apostle Paul tells us We come to these tables and eat the bread and drink the wine affirm the new covenant through Jesus. In 1 Cor. 11 we read:

"23 For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread 24 and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it."

Jesus started this practice of communion as covenant and told us to do it in remembrance of him. When you go to communion tables, grab one of these rings – Like "real" wedding rings, I want you to hold onto it and think of it in light of the metaphor of marriage and the covenant between you and God.

And I want you to ask yourself: what is it I need to pray today? What is it I need to return to, think about, when it comes to God's covenant through Jesus?

Do you need to admit that you've been the unfaithful spouse, that you need Jesus to transform you, to stand in your stead as the faithful bridegroom who will take your place? Then hold onto that ring and confess that you are in need of Jesus, that you know you have been unfaithful, but God is always faithful. If you want to know more, I'd love to talk and pray with you – Jesus is the faithful husband who lays down his life for the church, for YOU, for me. He offers this new covenant, this new relationship, to all who are willing to accept.

Or maybe you need to thank God for his work in you and submit yourself to his purification. Have you become a little too comfortable, instead of investing quality time, and experience joy in your relationship with Jesus? In communion, we examine ourselves, our sins and brokenness, and confess them, knowing they're covered by Jesus, the faithful bridegroom.

So maybe you need to take one of these rings and say: "I'm sorry, Jesus, for not returning back to you, for not submitting myself to you. I'm sorry for taking grace for granted. Change my heart, renew a new love for you and mold me and the rest of your people into the pure bride of Christ."

Close: We are going to reaffirm the covenant promise together, the vows, around the communion table.

And I'm going to do this a little differently than we normally do communion, but before I do, I want to tell you all that our communion tables located around the worship area are open to all people who want to remember Christ and his sacrifice and love, but if you're still wrestling with your faith and what you believe, you are more than welcome to just stay in your seats and think and meditate over what you've heard. And when you do come up to receive communion, remember to grab a wedding ring, and remember the covenant promise God made and fulfilled to you through his son Jesus Christ.

*On the night he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took the bread, and after he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take, eat. This is my body broken for you. Do it in remembrance of me." And in the same way, after supper he took the cup and after he had given thanks, he gave it to his disciples and said: "take, drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

*Now you feel ready and as you feel called, come and receive God's Holy gifts for God's Holy people. Amen.*